

Interview with Knight's Cross recipient Fritz Langanke, company commander of the 2nd SS Panzer Division 'Das Reich', Essen, 1988.

I like to ask what motivated men to join the SS. Can you tell me what attracted you to it?

Fritz: Yes, for me the SS was a new way of thinking, combined with our old traditions. I come from a very traditional German family and had a deep respect for the old values. The SS was seen as the pride of the nation, into which only the best Germans were admitted. I wanted to be part of that special group of men who were the standard bearers of the new era. I joined the Jungvolk, then the Hitler Youth, then I was in the RAD. All of this strengthened my opinion about these elite people of the National Socialist movement. The SS was the next step up the ladder. To join the SS you had to be in the best possible shape, physically and mentally. The entrance exams took the whole day as they included both mental and physical tests. There were many stations where a doctor could assess you. You had to certify that your genealogy goes back at least two hundred years and contains Germanic blood. This was to ensure that no one entered who was not a native German of the original Germanic people. I think I heard a statistic that only one in ten applicants got accepted. Anyone, whether poor or rich, was welcome in the SS if they had the necessary qualifications. There was no class structure, everyone was equal and treated as equals. The generals often ate with the privates, which was not common practice in the past.



What did the first years in the SS look like for you?



These Austrian girls are full of joy in Salzburg

Fritz: I was accepted into the 'Germania' regiment, the 10th company, and my training was similar to that of the military. Our leaders envisioned a force dedicated exclusively to the party, like the Praetorian Guard in Rome. We had no support from the army because they were against our existence. Himmler had to use SS funds to purchase equipment and weapons. I spent all of 1937 training, and in March 1938 the 'Germania' was among the troops welcomed by the Austrians. That was something special: thousands of people cheered us as we marched in.

A big lie being told today is that they didn't want us there. I was there and everyone came out to greet us and thank us for liberating their country.

Later in October we invaded Czechoslovakia.

This time we thought it might be more difficult, but here too people came out on the streets to greet us. The German minority was persecuted and was very happy about their liberation. The average Czech came out to see us. I could tell they were a little nervous about what was going to happen, but many offered us warm coffee and cake. In 1939 we were trained and deployed as occupation troops, which meant for us that we



Wehrmacht in Prague

had to help with the harvest or the widow with cleaning her farm. Our leaders always wanted us to make a good impression on everyone.

An older married SS man was thrown out when he had an affair with a Czech woman and she became pregnant. He is said to have told her that he wanted nothing to do with her and that the Germans were only here to conquer women. Maybe there's more to it, but what I'm saying is that *The* We were very respectful

everywhere we went. If we hadn't done that, we would have been in a lot of trouble. Another story I can tell is that of a comrade in my company who borrowed a bicycle to ride after a girl he saw on the tram. Our spie ordered him to not only buy the man a new bike, but also a better model.

What was the mood when the war began in 1939?

Fritz: Strangely enough, there was no showing off, no cheering and no talk of revenge. We were subdued and worried about our nation having to go to war again. We understood that we had to intervene to solve the problem because Poland refused to stop the border violations, the killing of Germans in Poland and the harassment of the German minority. The British declaration was unnecessary and misplaced, it only confirmed the leader's claim that the plutocrats wanted war to repair their rotten nations. I found that the Poles were tough fighters when well led; part of the 'Germania' picked up from [Jaworów](#) [vicinity

Lemberg] a bloody nose. The Poles hit our company with a well-led division and caused us heavy losses. Some of our troops fled, leaving behind a lot of equipment. The 'Germania' held out, but suffered very heavy losses before being overrun. We were still green and had no combat experience.

We thought we had to learn and what better way than to go into the fire? This paid off later in the war when we had much more experience with Allied tactics and had our baptism in battle. We also learned to trust our comrades with our lives. We were relieved that Poland was like that



Some of the equipment left behind by the 'Germania'. However, since the infantry units did not have specially trained crews to man the captured equipment, the loot was destroyed.

fell quickly, for his army was large and well equipped. Some divisions were better equipped than the Germans. We set about rebuilding and reorganizing to be better prepared for the Western Allies. I saw our tanks in action and decided that I wanted to be part of this elite group.



Visit of an SS cavalry unit on the Eastern Front, 1942

Have you ever met Reichsführer-SS Himmler or other high leaders?

Fritz: Yes, of course, as an early member of the SS-VT it was common to see Reichsführer-SS Himmler and others. We had many parade and honorary functions, although not as many as the LSSAH [*Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*], which was mainly used for civil service. Reichsführer-SS Himmler often paid for beautiful banquets and dance events for us. We celebrated many parties in our barracks and tried hard to invite the pretty girls. During the war we received visits from Reichsführer-SS Himmler or his aides, who brought greetings and gifts from home for the troops. I was always impressed with

how well he stayed in touch with his units and always made sure our needs were being met, both at the front and at home.

Was there really hostility between the SS and the Wehrmacht?

Fritz: Yes, there were. That didn't have to be the case, but the Wehrmacht was very jealous of a private army within the Nazi state. At the beginning they didn't want to help us in any way, weapons had to be bought with SS money and they refused to train with us. Many senior Wehrmacht leaders were stuck in the old days where there was no room for new thinking. We were loyal to the Führer and the new era he created while the Wehrmacht was still stuck in the old Prussian times. Luckily for us, some very good ex-Wehrmacht leaders came to us and trained us to be the best elite soldiers Germany ever had. When the war started, we were criticized by some army officers. We made mistakes early on, but we learned from them and kept getting better. At the end of the war, we saved Wehrmacht units from annihilation, and small SS combat groups held off entire enemy divisions. I would say that the Waffen-SS was superior to the average Wehrmacht unit in 1943; we were better trained, armed and motivated. We believed in what we were fighting for while most of the Wehrmacht was drafted and just longed to go home. I don't say this to insult my comrades, because most of those who served our nation did so with honor and bravery, no matter the field, but the SS men had a deeper understanding of what we were fighting for. The Wehrmacht fought for Germany, so did we, but even more so for a better one



[Georg Carl Paul Hausser](#), also Papa Hausser, was a German officer in the Prussian Army, the German Army, the Freikorps, the Reichswehr and the Schutzstaffel, most recently SS Colonel Group Leader and Colonel General of the Waffen-SS as well as a sword carrier in the Second World War. Hausser was considered the creator and initiator of the Waffen-SS and was one of the professional military men who led this force together with [Felix Steiner](#), [Friedemann Götz](#), [Wilhelm Bittrich](#), [George Keppler](#) and [Cassius Baron of Montigny](#) from the beginning.

World for everyone in which National Socialism could flourish to show people a better future.

They fought against the Western Allies in Normandy. What was your experience and how did you experience the Western Allies?

Fritz: I didn't notice a big difference between the Allies. Many Germans say that the Western Allies were more European and therefore treated us better than the Russians, but I disagree. I saw the consequences of war crimes in Normandy as well as in Russia. Allied propaganda misled both civilians and soldiers into believing that we were all murderers of innocents. When the shooting began, the Allies felt they were on a holy crusade to eradicate the Nazi plague, and in France the bandits joined in, led by Allied agents. From the beginning, Allied soldiers often killed surrendering Germans. The HJ division allegedly attacked a hospital, but the Canadians were responsible for it. I have nothing against the Allies and wish they had had better leaders who would have seen the war for what it was, the destruction of the Europeans, but the atrocities they committed are unforgivable. Even more so since they lied about it.



Complete destruction of entire cities by Allied bombers, like this one in St. Lo, France, summer 1944

On the Eastern Front, the Russians were often loose and undisciplined, but there was still a sense of honor in many units. When 'The Reich' was near Kursk there was a lull in which a Russian captain was shot and our medics treated him. Under a white flag, his assistant came out with an interpreter and asked if they could trade him for a wounded officer. The German said he had been well looked after by the enemy and had been given a small bottle of vodka which he wanted to share with us. This happened more often than historians care to research. The Russians are always accused of being barbarians, but I didn't find this to be the case. However, their Jewish political officers were a different story, and the crimes at the end of the war were horrific. We are accused of being very cruel and hateful towards the Russians, but that is not true either. We treated them well, and that's why so many people helped us. The homeland often complained about the many Russian prisoners who were allowed to work freely in the fields and felt like they were intruding on them. The Allies in Normandy left a very bad impression on me. They shelled areas without thorough reconnaissance and killed many civilians in the process, following the motto "shoot first, see what you're shooting at." According to some French people I have stayed in touch with, the Allies have killed so many French civilians that they never want to be 'liberated' again.

You received the Knight's Cross for your leadership qualities in Normandy, how did that come about?

Fritz: Normandy was a very hard fight for us. The Allies controlled the air and made it very difficult for our tanks to move. Even our march into Normandy was difficult as they used bandits and commandos to slow us down. 'The Reich' entered the battle when it was already too late, and we were unable to advance far due to the firepower the Allies brought to bear on us. Hundreds of naval guns and artillery batteries that had made it ashore met every advance on the beach. We fought mainly on the defensive, trying to keep the Allies at bay.

We were outnumbered and had no real mobility without control of the air. Our units worked together in an exemplary manner and fought bravely, even when all hope was lost. I received my Knight's Cross here. I was in a large group that was surrounded, and many of the Wehrmacht units had just left their vehicles and equipment behind and tried to sneak away on foot, but were captured. We had an American prisoner who set up the defensive line *July 31, 1944: An SdKfz 251 troop transport and a self-propelled Hummel howitzer that belonged to the 1st battery of*



the SS . I didn't want to belong to Panzer-Artillerie-Regiment 2 of the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich and be left behind in Saint-Denis-le-Gast by the Germans.

to be captured as I knew what could happen so I gathered a few Panthers and found more tanks to join us. I informed the officers of my plan, they all followed me, and then we set out and penetrated the enemy's front. They were prepared, but the Panthers' guns were loud, silencing any resistance and taking out many Shermans.

This ragtag group transformed into a ferocious fighting force and fought a superior enemy by capturing vital bridges before they could be blown up.

For me it was just a natural desire to survive. I was surprised when I found out that the Knight's Cross had been awarded.

You cannot talk about the Waffen-SS without addressing the atrocities of which you are accused. May I ask your opinion on the Allied claims, particularly Oradour?

Fritz: If I have to, young man, but I have to be careful. You mention Oradour sur Glane; I know it well because my division was involved in it. I can tell you clearly that this was not an atrocity, but a retaliation against murderous bandits gone wrong. Most people don't know what happened to us and our allies at the hands of these bandits. All they learned is that SS men killed men, women and children for no reason. The affected units were involved in tough battles with bandits and died at the hands of people who should never have fought. These men had mothers, wives and children. Some were found horribly mutilated. I have never understood what makes people torture a surrendered soldier like that. We found Wehrmacht, SS and medical soldiers who had been burned alive, one of the worst acts. A man who later fell in Normandy took photographs of them as evidence, but never had the chance to develop them. Oradour was a city where many communists from all over Europe had settled to escape the occupation. The Allies took advantage of this willing mob and pressured them into action. The Allies armed them, trained them and paid them, but they were civilians. An officer had been captured and held for ransom, which was quite common. We did the same thing so we could make an exchange. This time it was different: the officer who was looking for his return found out that he had been killed and he saw an ambulance that was attacked and everyone in it was dead. He saw that even the women and children were wearing the bandits' bracelets, showing that they were under their control.



The ruins of the church in Oradour-sur-Glane

Other units were brought in to find out who was responsible. Everyone was taken to church while the village was searched; Many weapons, explosives and money were found. As the people began to speak, they betrayed the leaders who came out and

were interrogated. Later, people in the church heard the shots as the leaders were executed. It is believed that someone in the church, wanting to get to the hidden weapons, detonated the explosives and set the church on fire. The church burned quickly and hotly because it contained a type of explosive used to melt rails. Normal fire doesn't melt church bells or steel, but this fire does. Although the Germans tried to put out the flames and rescue people, the ammunition exploded and it was too hot to gain entry. Afterwards, 'The Reich' still had the task of moving to the battle front. The area was abandoned and the communists moved in. They brought every member of the press they could find to portray this as an SS atrocity. From the outside it looked that way, but as with everything the SS is accused of, a more detailed investigation must take place.

There was a trial in France in which no German defendant was found guilty or had charges dropped; that should say something. An English author a few years ago

tricked many of us into talking to him and then twisted and lied about what we told him. Many SS men will no longer talk about alleged war crimes because lying can easily land them in prison. People who call themselves investigative reporters or historians keep trying to get us to talk about alleged crimes, but they all seem to have a hidden agenda and never report what we actually say. In my opinion, we didn't do anything wrong on any front. All civilians we killed were legitimate and in accordance with the agreed rules of war that we followed.

There may only be a few times that an overzealous and overtired officer has allowed a questionable killing, but I bet there's more to it than meets the eye.

[Fritz Langanke](#)



General view of the courtroom of the military court in Bordeaux during the Oradour-sur-Glane trial. The German defendants occupy the first two rows on the left.

The Alsatians sit in the third row from the left and occupy all rows on the right. 14.

January 1953.



Excerpt from Langanke's recommendation for the Knight's Cross:

"SS-Standartenoberjunker Langanke, platoon leader in the II./SS-Pz.Rgt. 2, was separated from his department on July 28, 1944 along with 3 Panthers. During this time he made the independent decision to gather 300 army grenadiers and attempt a breakout on the night of July 29/30, 1944. In his advance through St. Denis he personally destroyed 13 tanks, 4 anti-tank guns, 8 half-tracks and 10 trucks in a series of tough but successful engagements. Ultimately he managed to return to his own lines while clearing the way to freedom for many other units, including an anti-aircraft battery (with five 3.7 cm guns), 2 Grille SPGs, 3 assault guns and 29 trucks."

[traces of war](#)



Fritz Langanke (left) and Ernst Barkmann, both veterans of the "Das Reich" tank regiment and best friends after the war.